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CHRISTIANITY AND CRITICAL THEOLOGY

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Will Christianity be religiously stronger or weaker if it welcome the critical method of studying the Bible and the consequent critical attitude toward the problems of theology? Upon the answer to this practical question rightly depends the attitude of Christian people. The full consequences of the critical method will not be seen until this question is faced. Some aspects of the problem will be considered in this article.

The attitude of Christianity toward critical learning has presented puzzling contrasts. At times it has employed the most thoroughgoing scholarship in the exposition of its doctrines. At other times it has revolted from the alleged barrenness of science and philosophy, and has made its primary appeal to an intuitive religious experience. This mingled sentiment of trust and distrust reveals the fact that scientific methods may be either an aid or a hindrance to the religious life. On the one hand, the truth of religion itself lies deeper than the truth of mere statements about religion, no matter how accurate the latter may be; on the other hand, if religion cannot appeal to the best scholarship of the day for its support, it loses its influence over the strongest minds.

A recent book devoted to the problem of the significance of our beliefs for our fundamental religious experience has a chapter bearing the suggestive title, "How Ideas of Ideas Misrepresent Them."¹ Following the lead of modern psychology, the author calls attention to the fact that ideas are primarily what we think *with* in order to interpret our experience, and only secondarily objects of meditation. But it is possible to make the ideas themselves objects of thought. If this process of abstraction is carried far enough, it is evident that the "ideas of ideas" may seriously

¹ Hocking, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*, chap. vii. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1912.

misrepresent the reality which is always fundamental. In such a case, religion rightly protests against the perversion which comes from devoting too much attention to secondary rather than primary aspects of experience.

Nevertheless, experience cannot thrive without using ideas. And ideas cannot be most helpfully used without a criticism of their adequacy. This task of criticism is what theology undertakes in order to provide Christian life and endeavor with the best conceptual tools possible for the propagation and explanation of the Christian message. So long as theology embodies the recognition of this as its primary business, it is welcomed as a positive aid to religion. But when it neglects this relationship between its theories and the religious life which the theories serve to organize; when, in other words, it comes to be more interested in "ideas of ideas" than in the function of ideas in religious experience, it may incur the distrust of those who are concerned for the vigor and the purity of the religious life. The reaction against such a barren theology sometimes takes the form of a mystical appeal to "feeling" or to "experience" without any clear apprehension of the way in which this religion of pure experience may organize itself so as to avoid the reproach of hopeless subjectivity. Sometimes the attempt is made to substitute for the ideas of the objectionable theology the "authoritative" ideas of Scripture or of creed. Thus in the past the revolt against an academic theology has usually issued either in emotional pietism or in scriptural or creedal legalism. But the spirit of Christianity cannot be satisfied with either. Hence the revolts have not secured any permanently satisfactory basis for the construction of beliefs.

Now a third possibility is furnished by a critical theology based on the principles which emerge from the historical method of studying religion. Instead of seeking to correct a barren theological scholarship by an appeal to "experience" without any provision for scientific analysis, or by an appeal to an authorized system of ideas which, because of their claims to authority, are regarded as immune from criticism, it now becomes possible to seek the aid of scientific means of analyzing the significance of religious ideas, so as to determine what it is that makes a doctrine helpful to religious

life and what constitutes a harmful influence in theoretical endeavors. That conception of the function of doctrine in religious life which is disclosed by a historical understanding of religion makes it possible to enlist the aid of exact scholarship in the very reaction from intellectual formalism which ordinarily in the past has led to a breach between Christianity and the science of the day. Let us now consider this aspect of critical scholarship.

One of the most significant of the conclusions of modern scholarship is the recognition of the fact that religion is a fundamental and primary activity of the human spirit. Science or philosophy cannot create religion. The scientific investigator can only observe and analyze what he finds in the actual experience of man. The great French philosopher, Comte, with all his eagerness to organize a scientifically determined religion which should supplant crude faiths and unite men in the worship and the service of humanity, failed to attract more than a handful of followers. Religion is not dependent on science or culture or philosophy for its existence. It is a great fundamental reality due to the practical need of man for superhuman aid in his struggle with the adverse forces of his environment. The scientific study of religion today takes away our fear lest religion shall perish without the aid of scholarship. Without such aid it may, indeed, become crude and fanatical; but it will not perish. But, on the other hand, scholarship can never take the place of religion; for life insists upon the enrichment which can come only through the practical channels of prayer and communion with the unseen divine presence.

In addition to this recognition of the primary character of religion another significant fact must be noted. Those religions which actually have the greatest power to survive and to grow by missionary and evangelical activity owe their origin to the profound religious experience of some founder, who disclosed in his life and teaching the possibilities of a deeper, richer relationship to the unseen source of spiritual vigor and comfort. The great religions of the world today are named after personal originators. The significant modifications of such religions are due to the creative experience and insight of prophets and reformers. The more accurately we know the facts about Christianity, the more clear it

becomes that the real essence of our religion must be sought through an understanding of the inner life of those who revealed to others the secret of a more profound religious experience. In order to know Christianity, we must know Jesus and the great persons in Christian history whose lives have been made into creative centers of spiritual influence through the transforming power of Jesus.

Professor Paul Wernle, of Basel, in his recently published manual intended to introduce students to the meaning of modern theological scholarship,² makes the suggestive distinction between what he calls original, or "first-hand," religion (*Religion aus erster Hand*) and secondary, or traditional, religion. There are great religious geniuses, upon whose insight multitudes of men are dependent. Just in so far as acquaintance with these original sources of religious insight is neglected, one's own religious life is restricted. Even the most thoroughgoing study of theological doctrines falls far short of the value to be found in a knowledge of the experience of a man who furnishes "at first hand" a revelation of the meaning of religion. Indeed, the doctrines of institutional Christianity derive their value from the fact that they represent attempts to work over and to make clear the significance of the revelation derived from the original personal sources of real religion.

This emphasis on the part of modern scholarship differentiates it from the "rationalism" of former days which religious men so dread. If the outcome of a critical study of religion were to transfer our affections and our sense of dependence away from the great personalities of the Bible and of Christian history, and to persuade men to try to live solely by the inspiration which might be derived from rational theories, such scholarship would indeed be dangerous to the positive interests of Christianity. But if the critical-historical method, when logically complete, leads to a new appreciation of the significance of the great creative sources of religion, it can but deepen and strengthen the religious life which is dependent on these sources for its vigor. For, as has been repeatedly insisted in our discussions, the historical method forbids us to deal with doctrines in isolation from the life which found expression in the doctrines. And when that life has been discovered, it is traceable

² *Einführung in das theologische Studium.* 2^{te} Auflage. Tübingen: Mohr, 1911.

to the prophets and the seers and the reformers who arise in the course of the development of religion.

It must be admitted that critical scholarship, like other types of scholarship, must often plead guilty to much emphasis on detailed technical scholarship, as if such scholarship somehow would reveal the essence of religion. It is just as possible to substitute for real religious study a purely intellectual interest in the questions of date and authorship as it is to substitute formal theology for genuine piety. A pride in one's knowledge of higher criticism is no more conducive to religious profundity than is a pride in one's mastery of a distinctive system of doctrine. In so far as a man thinks he is a better Christian just because he is sophisticated, he is far from the spirit of Jesus. The details of criticism no more yield the realities of religion than do the philological investigations of the classical scholars the spiritual significance of Plato. If one stop short with the mere intellectual problems, one has missed the very reality for the understanding of which the intellectual processes ought to prepare. If one can look beyond the grammars and the rhetorical rules and the philological connections to the literature, all scholarship contributes to a deeper appreciation of the spiritual message. But if these technical problems become ends in themselves, or come to claim one's total attention, they may stand in the way of a better understanding of Christianity. It is incumbent on critical scholarship to bring clearly to light the advantage which it possesses in its apprehension of the relation between religious experience and doctrinal formulations, so that it shall not stop short of its entire opportunity. Fortunately the time is well-nigh past when "higher criticism" can be mistakenly viewed as a superior form of cultured religion. Criticism is simply a *means* by which we may determine more accurately than was formerly possible the exact character of the religion of the biblical literature. But only as our hearts shall burn with zeal to become disciples of those who so clearly and vigorously expounded the meaning of a life with God can we gain from the Bible that which it may yield.

Whether a man is a Christian or not is not determined by the method he uses in studying the literature of Christianity. One could use all the canons of critical method in the study of the rise

and the growth of Mormonism without becoming a Mormon. So it will not necessarily make men Christians to adopt the critical method of studying the Bible. Only as the content of the biblical religion shall make its appeal will one become a disciple of the prophets and of Jesus. But the more accurate presentation of the content of the biblical religion which is made possible by critical methods ought to bring us face to face with the necessity for a significant moral decision. So long as it was possible to use such inexact methods of exegesis that men could claim the authority of the Bible for a form of religion which was congenial to their preferences, they might fail to face the fundamental summons of the religion of the Bible. But if critical scholarship does its work; if as a result of such scholarship, we know accurately the content of biblical religion, there is no possibility of self-deception.

What is it, then, that we find as a result of our critical study of the great original sources of the Christian religion? What emerges from a critical examination of the utterances of the Bible and of the beliefs of the great expounders of Christianity? What is the fundamental choice set before men, on the basis of which one decides whether or not one is a Christian?

Criticism has shown that the Old Testament is best understood as a monument to the religion of the prophets. It is true that we find in the Old Testament traces of primitive beliefs and practices, and we can observe the hardening effects of ecclesiastical interests. But the significant thing about that literature is the way in which all these earlier cults and all the later ecclesiastical developments were compelled to recognize and to embody the fundamental message of the prophets. The religion of Israel represents a development of beliefs and practices in accordance with the necessities of political, social, and economic life, embodies the specific interests and emphases demanded by that life; but all came to be interpreted in the light of the prophetic message. It is this prophetic religion which makes the Old Testament so significant. To the men of old who heard the messages of the prophets, and to the men of later times who read those messages comes a fundamental summons. That summons takes the form of a demand that the facts of life be faced in all their evil aspects and that anyone who

proposes to be religious shall make his religion consist in repentance for the evil which is being committed and in whole-hearted devotion to the will of the God of righteousness. All else is subordinate to this great issue. There can be no hiding behind the defenses of liturgical or ritual conformity, no blind trust in ready-made theological formulae. The primary question is whether one is willing to repent for his sins and to seek the favor of God through devotion to a righteous life. We are rediscovering in our own day how thoroughly in accord with the demands of what we call the "social gospel" is this message of the prophets.

Moreover, the prophets did not hesitate to criticize adversely any theology which stood in the way of this fundamental moral decision. Without it, true religion was, in their estimation, impossible. If the choice lay between moral honesty and the retention of religious forms which had received the sanction of approved usage, the religious forms must be eradicated or transformed. Even the word of an earlier prophet might be so repeated by disciples that it was denounced by a later prophet as "false," just because it was leading men to trust in something other than the honest facing of the facts in the spirit of moral earnestness. Criticism has clearly revealed this character of the prophetic message. It has at the same time made it evident that we cannot today honestly assent to some of the beliefs which are recorded in the Old Testament. It thus sets before us a choice similar to that which was demanded of the men by the prophets themselves, and brings us face to face with the question whether we are willing to commit ourselves at any cost in religious self-surrender to the demands of personal and social righteousness. Only through such surrender can we expect the highest superhuman aid in our life.

This fundamental summons of the prophets was reaffirmed by Jesus. With unwavering clearness he revealed the damaging character of a trust in rites or beliefs if it did not mean a complete self-surrender to the righteous purposes of God. Although he engaged in no criticism of the current belief that the Old Testament was the authoritative word of God, he did not hesitate to criticize adversely any interpretation of the Scriptures which blunted the edge of simple humanitarian morality; and did not

hesitate to characterize a certain Mosaic provision as the refuge of those whose hardened hearts prevented them from seeing the higher ideal. To this repetition of the prophetic message, Jesus added the unfathomable experience of a life constantly in closest communion with God, so that his absolute devotion to his own ideals was seen to mean the presence of God in his innermost being. Because of this peculiar possession of inner power as the practical evidence of the truth of his religious message, he spoke to his followers "with authority," and has since remained to all generations the supremely significant source of religious inspiration and insight. No one can understand the story of the life of Jesus without being brought face to face with the most searching scrutiny of the motives of his inner life. One must make the great decision for or against the ideal which Jesus presents.

Just as the Old Testament gains its significance from the fact that it is the record of the determined attempts of men to think out their problems in the light of the prophetic message, so the New Testament becomes for the critical student the record of the ways in which men of the first century tried to interpret their world of thought and action under the sway of the summons of Jesus. As a result of this critical understanding of the Bible, it becomes impossible to substitute for the spiritual summons of the prophets and of Jesus a demand that we shall simply conform to the doctrines of the Bible. Such a demand would so signally distract attention from the fundamental message of the religion of the Bible as to bring the danger that the real spirit of Christianity might be lost beneath incidental forms as the real spirit of the prophets was lost beneath scribal interpretation of the Scriptures in Jesus' day. Who shall say that this danger is an imaginary one, when we note the theological controversies of Christian history? We need ever to be helped to look back of the details of biblical doctrines so as to perceive this fundamental summons to an honest facing of the moral problem as that without which biblical doctrine would cease to have the power which it has exerted in human history.

A Christian is one who makes an affirmative response to this fundamental summons, and who then seeks to give such an interpretation to his life and to the world in which he must live as

to make effective the choice which he has made. In early days this gave rise to a theology which was so impressed by the existing tremendous opposition to Christian ideals, that it despaired of finding the Kingdom in this evil age. Faith in the righteous God, who spoke through the prophets and who so dwelt in Jesus that the character of God was manifested for the help and the salvation of men, therefore took the form of a separatist ethics and a theology which pictured ideals in terms of another world rather than in terms of an evolution of this world. The important thing, however, is that the power of the faith which Jesus inspired was strong enough to dominate this eschatological theology, and through it to enable men to withstand persecution and to endure sacrifice for the sake of loyalty to Christ. Because it kept Christians true to the best that they knew and thus enabled them to put spiritual things first, it received the reverence and the honor which eventually led to its canonization.

But the eschatological theology of the New Testament is not the only way in which this conquering spirit of the religion of Jesus found expression. As the power of the community which had been transformed by the experience of salvation through Christ grew, men arose who began to dream of a conquest of this world in the name and through the power of Christ. Professor Percy Gardner, in a suggestive book,³ has narrated the successive "baptisms" by which the practices and the institutions and the learning of the world, which were originally distrusted, became transformed by the power of the Christian spirit, until at the end of the Middle Ages western civilization was all formally under the dominion of the Christian church. The learning of Plato and of Aristotle had been made to promote men's certainty of the existence of the God of the prophets and of Jesus. Gods and heroes of paganism had been transformed into saints and had humbly submitted to the lordship of Christ, so that they were now significant because in some signal way they were believed to have embodied Christian virtues. The haughty power of pagan Rome had fallen, and the vicar of Christ occupied the seat of the Caesars. Such a triumph of Christianity over the secular forces of the western world was something for which the early disciples did not dare to hope.

³ *The Development of Christianity*.

Of course, this larger program made necessary a larger theology. If men were to be able to make the spirit of Christ actually dominant they must give to the world in which they lived a Christian interpretation. It is true that there thus came into Christian theology many elements quite unlike those which found expression in the New Testament. It is also true that in the enlargement it was possible for the emphasis to be placed on items which were not at all essential to Christianity. But we ought not to forget that the abuses which crept in were again and again detected and corrected by loyal men who had been influenced by the real spirit of the Bible and who had felt the power of the ethical religion there set forth. From these reformers as well as from the men of the Bible we may learn the power of Christianity. Augustine, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Bernard, Savonarola, Luther, Wesley, and others keep alive for us the light of the gospel, and show us how it could conquer new worlds of thought and action.

We are today beginning to realize what it means to live in the larger universe which has been disclosed by the science and the discoveries of recent times. Our situation is, in a way, similar to that of the early Christians, who felt that the big world was so indifferent to their message and so hostile to the rule of the Messiah, that the culmination of faith could come only in another world. We have awakened to the fact that the universe of modern science seems to make no place for the miracles of grace which men of old dared to affirm; that the nations of the world are one by one freeing themselves from formal connection with the church in order to pursue independent secular policies; that notions of success are abroad which make the self-sacrifice required by Christianity seem like foolish self-defeat; that critical scholarship makes it no longer possible to defend Christian ideals by an appeal to authority, but that these must enter without any special favors into the rough competition of ideals for supremacy. The question of the day is whether Christianity is strong enough to prevail in this new world.

Such a conquest will be possible only as men shall be able to convince themselves that the splendid ideals which dominate the biblical thought and which have had such a triumphant history are actually practicable in the modern world. If we are really per-

suaded that the Copernican astronomy and the evolutionary view of human history are true, and if at the same time we should become convinced that the spirit of Christianity required the denial of these doctrines, it would manifestly be impossible for us to remain Christians unless we went back to pre-scientific notions of the nature of the world and of human life. But the intelligent understanding of the history of our religion makes it evident that so sublime a faith as that which has expressed itself in Christian ideals is triumphant just because it is capable of inspiring daring attempts to give to the best wisdom of men a religious interpretation that shall enable them to believe with all their heart in the reality of a righteous, loving God, whose will is to establish righteousness among men so that his Kingdom may come. Already the new interpretations are taking form. The Modernists, both in Catholicism and in Protestantism, cannot be content to allow Christianity to save only those who think in terms of an outgrown science and who fear to trust the honest experiments of men. Christianity, in their estimation, is powerful enough to introduce high religious ideals into the thoughts and the practices of the modern world, as it (in intention and theory, at least) dominated the thoughts and the practices of the mediaeval world.

What, then, is the service which a critical theology can render? It can summon men to dare to be true to the inner conviction which is created by discipleship to Jesus, and to venture to lead the conquest of our modern world in the strength of that faith. It will frankly welcome all scientific, political, and social principles which seem to be true, and will endeavor to give to those principles such a religious interpretation that men may be convinced that the truest manhood and the highest wisdom is to be found only where Christianity shall have disclosed the great moral and religious summons which the Bible has voiced and which Christians for nearly two millenniums have been trying to make effective. A Christian theology for today must, of course, be different from the theology of the New Testament in so far as our ways of thinking and our practical problems are different. It must differ from the theology of primitive Protestantism just in so far as our life brings us into contact with issues different from those of the sixteenth century.

It will expect that the theology of tomorrow will differ from the theology of today just in so far as human life shall be altered by the different science and the different experience of tomorrow. But beneath all these differences in theology it will recognize the abiding power of the spirit of Christ, impelling men of every nation and of every walk of life to give to the world such an interpretation as shall make effective a belief in the righteous purpose and the redeeming power of the God whom Jesus reveals. If this spirit be preserved, we shall have Christianity, no matter how often the theologies in which it finds partial and temporary expression may be altered or even discredited. It is this emphasis on the Religion of the Spirit and this new appreciation of the significance of the message of the Bible which the critical method helps us to acquire. For all who really appreciate the meaning of this attitude, an unparalleled opportunity stands waiting. The new world of our modern science, our modern industry, our modern politics, our modern international relations, our modern missionary enterprise, our modern social problems—yes, and perhaps first and most important, our distracted and pleasure-seeking modern personal life—this world awaits the transforming power of Christian faith. A critical theology today has before it the opportunity for one of the most inspiring constructive tasks ever possible in human history.